

Washington Becomes President...

The Title Debate

Washington had reason to be nervous. The first Congress was deeply divided. Some members were eager to build a strong national government. Others were just as eager to limit the power of the new government. These differences showed up immediately in a debate over what title to use when addressing the president.

Vice President John Adams pointed out that European heads of government had titles like “Your Excellency” that showed respect for their office. The president, he argued, should have a similar title. Supporters of a strong national government agreed.

Others argued that such titles smelled of royalty and had no place in a democracy. A few members of Congress joked that the rather plump Adams should be given the title “His Rotundity” (His Roundness). The debate finally ended when Washington let it be known that he preferred the simple title “Mr. President.”

Setting Up the Executive Branch

Next, Congress turned to the task of creating executive departments. As Washington had feared, arguments broke out at once over what those departments should be and what powers they should have.

Congress eventually approved three departments. A Department of State was set up to handle relations with other countries. A Department of War was established to defend the nation. A Treasury Department was set up to oversee the nation’s finances. Congress also created an attorney general to serve as the president’s legal advisor, and a postmaster general to head the postal system.

Washington chose men he trusted—such as Jefferson, Hamilton, and Knox—to fill these positions. He often met with them to ask for their ideas and advice. The heads of the executive departments became known as the president’s cabinet.

The Whiskey Rebellion

Because the national treasury was empty, in 1791 Congress put a tax on “luxury” goods like whiskey and carriages. Settlers living west of the Appalachian Mountains howled in protest. Western farmers found it too costly to haul their grain across the mountains to sell in eastern cities. Instead, they distilled their bulky wheat into whiskey, which could be shipped more cheaply. Many farmers complained that the tax made their whiskey too expensive, and refused to pay it.

To end these protests, Congress lowered the tax in 1793. Most farmers began to pay up, but not the tax rebels of western Pennsylvania. These “Whiskey Boys” tarred and feathered tax collectors who tried to enforce the law.

Hamilton and Washington saw the Whiskey Rebellion as a threat to the authority of the national government. At Hamilton’s urging, Washington led 13,000 state militia troops across the mountains to crush the rebels. Faced with overwhelming force, the rebellion melted away.

Jefferson thought that the idea of sending an army to catch a few tax rebels was foolish. Even worse, he believed, Hamilton was prepared to violate people’s liberties by using armed force to put down opposition to government policies.

The French Revolution

Meanwhile, the nation was caught up in a debate over events in France. In 1789, the French people rebelled against their king. The leaders of the French Revolution dreamed of building a nation based on “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” or brotherhood. Three years later, France became a republic and declared “a war of all peoples against all kings.”

Many Americans were thrilled by the French Revolution. This was especially true of Jefferson and his followers, who began calling themselves Democratic-Republicans, or simply Republicans. The Republicans saw the French Revolution as part of a great crusade for democracy. In time, news from France caused supporters of the revolution to think again. Cheered on by angry mobs, France’s revolutionary government began cutting off the heads of wealthy nobles. Some 20,000 men, women, and children were killed.

Hamilton and his followers, who called themselves Federalists, were appalled by the bloodshed. Many Federalists were themselves well-off. Many wealthy Americans feared that the same thing would happen to them. This caused tension between different groups of Americans that challenged Washington’s presidency.

In the end, Washington chose not to help France with their revolution. Americans, he said, did not have the money to support another country’s war--especially as they were still recovering from their own Revolution. He also did not want to anger Great Britain, who wanted France to fail. Americans needed both allies (France and Britain) to help build the US and the US economy.

Washington’s Farewell Address

The growing division between Republicans and Federalists so disturbed Washington that he agreed to run for a second term as president in 1792. He was the only person, Hamilton and Jefferson told him, who could keep the nation from pulling apart.

Near the end of his second term, Washington announced that he would not run again. Before leaving office, the president prepared a farewell address, or message. In it he reminded Americans of all that bound them together as a people. “With slight shades of difference,” he said, “you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together.”

Next, Washington warned of two threats to the nation’s future. One of the threats was problems with other countries. Washington encouraged Americans and Congress to be neutral regarding foreign affairs. The other threat was “the spirit of party.” (*A party is a political group.*) It was natural for people to hold different opinions, Washington said. But he warned against the dangers of passionate loyalty to parties. If fighting between parties was not controlled, it could tear the young nation apart.

Despite his worries for the future, Washington had much to be proud of as he left office. The new government was up and running. The nation was growing so fast that it had added three new states—Kentucky, Tennessee, and Vermont. Most of all, Washington had steered his government safely through quarrelsome times. He left the nation united and at peace.